Franco-Prussian War

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Bismarck's Bait: Unraveling France's Fall in the Franco-Prussian War

The Franco-Prussian War, also known as the Franco-German War, was a pivotal conflict that reshaped the political landscape of Europe. It was fought between the Second French Empire and the North German Confederation under Prussian leadership from July 19, 1870, to January 28, 1871. The war stemmed from France's desire to maintain its supremacy in Europe, which was threatened by Prussia's growing power, especially after Prussia's victory against Austria in 1866.

Bismarck's Role and the Southern German States

A key figure in the war was Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, whose actions were instrumental in its outbreak. Some historians argue that Bismarck intentionally goaded France into war to facilitate the unification of southern German states with the North German Confederation. Others suggest that while Bismarck did not create the conflict, he adeptly used the unfolding events to Germany's advantage. Regardless of the differing views, there is consensus that Bismarck saw and seized the opportunity to strengthen German unity.

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Catalyst of the War

The immediate spark for the war was the candidacy of Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen for the Spanish throne, which France perceived as a threat. This concern led to diplomatic efforts to prevent the prince's ascension. Bismarck's release of the Ems Telegram, a document that insulted the French, was the final provocation that pushed France to declare war on Prussia.

The Franco-Prussian War concluded with a decisive German victory, marking the end of French dominance in Europe. The war's outcome led to the proclamation of the German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, a symbolic act that humiliated France and altered the European balance of power.

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SCHOOL HISTORY

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Historical context of the Franco-Prussian War
- The two armies involved in the Franco-Prussian War
- The causes and effects of the Franco-Prussian War
- Key events that occurred during the Franco-Prussian War

FACT FILE

The Franco-Prussian war or Franco-German war was a conflict between the Second French Empire and later the Third French Republic, and the German states of the North German Confederation led by the Kingdom of Prussia.

- It lasted from 19 July 1870 to 28 January 1871 and it was caused by Prussian ambitions to extend German unification and French fears of the shift in the European balance of power, if the Prussians were to succeed.

Let's find out more about the Franco-Prussian War!

Franco-Prussian War: the wounded French from the Sedan Campa

- The Treaty of Frankfurt signed on 10 May 1871 gave Germany most of Alsace and some parts of Lorraine, which became the Imperial territory of Alsace-Loraine.

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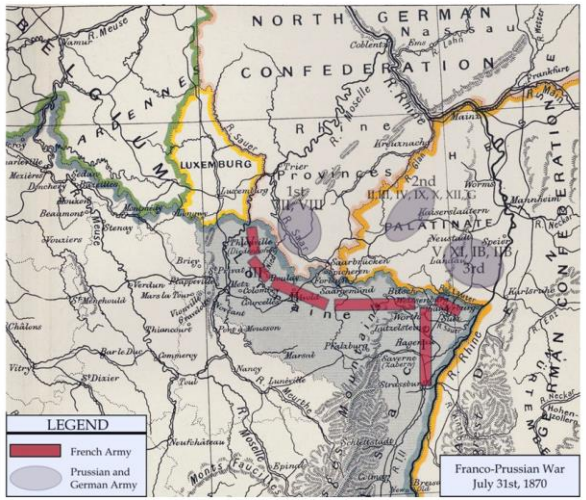

Map of the German and French armies near the common border on 31 July 1870

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Europe after the Franco-Prussian War and the unification of Germany

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The "Rifle Battalion 9 from Lauenburg" at Gravelotte

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Surrender of Metz

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The Cemetery of St. Privat by Alphonse-Marie-Adolphe de Neuville (1881)

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The Franco-Prussian War or Franco-German War, often referred to in France as the War of 1870, was a conflict between the Second French Empire and the North German Confederation led by the Kingdom of Prussia. Lasting from 19 July 1870 to 28 January 1871, the conflict was caused primarily by France's determination to reassert its dominant position in continental Europe, which appeared in question following the decisive Prussian victory over Austria in 1866. According to some historians, Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck deliberately provoked the French into declaring war on Prussia in order to induce four independent southern German states—Baden, Württemberg, Bavaria and Hesse-Darmstadt—to join the North German Confederation; other historians contend that Bismarck exploited the circumstances as they unfolded. All agree that Bismarck recognized the potential for new German alliances, given the situation as a whole.

France mobilised its army on 15 July 1870, leading the North German Confederation to respond with its own mobilisation later that day. On 16 July 1870, the French parliament voted to declare war on Prussia; France invaded German territory on 2 August. The German coalition mobilised its troops much more effectively than the French and invaded northeastern France on 4 August. German forces were superior in numbers, training, and leadership and made more effective use of modern technology, particularly railways and artillery.

A series of hard fought Prussian and German victories in eastern France, culminating in the Siege of Metz and the Battle of Sedan, resulted in the capture of the French Emperor Napoleon III and the decisive defeat of the army of the Second Empire; a Government of National Defense was formed in Paris on 4 September and continued the war for another five months. German forces fought and defeated new French armies in northern France, then besieged Paris for over four months before it fell on 28 January 1871, effectively ending the war.

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In the final days of the war, with German victory all but assured, the German states proclaimed their union as the German Empire under the Prussian king Wilhelm I and Chancellor Bismarck. With the notable exceptions of Austria and German Switzerland, the vast majority of German-speakers were united under a nation-state for the first time. Following an armistice with France, the Treaty of Frankfurt was signed on 10 May 1871, giving Germany billions of francs in war indemnity, as well as most of Alsace and parts of Lorraine, which became the Imperial Territory of Alsace-Lorraine (Reichsland Elsaß-Lothringen).

The war had a lasting impact on Europe. By hastening German unification, the war significantly altered the balance of power on the continent, with the new German state supplanting France as the dominant European land power. Bismarck maintained great authority in international affairs for two decades, developing a reputation for Realpolitik that raised Germany's global stature and influence. In France, it brought a final end to imperial rule and began the first lasting republican government. Resentment over the French government's handling of the war and its aftermath triggered the Paris Commune, a revolutionary uprising which seized and held power for two months before its bloody suppression; the event would influence the politics and policies of the Third Republic.

The causes of the Franco-Prussian War are rooted in the events surrounding the gradual march toward the unification of the German states under Otto von Bismarck. France had gained the status of being the dominant power of continental Europe as a result of the Franco-Austrian War of 1859. During the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, the Empress Eugénie, Foreign Minister Drouyn de Lhuys and War Minister Jacques Louis Randon were concerned that the power of Prussia might overtake that of France.

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They unsuccessfully urged Napoleon to mass troops at France's eastern borders while the bulk of the Prussian armies were still engaged in Bohemia as a warning that no territorial changes could be effected in Germany without consulting France. As a result of Prussia's annexation of several German states which had sided with Austria during the war and the formation of the North German Confederation under Prussia's aegis, French public opinion stiffened and now demanded more firmness as well as territorial compensations. As a result, Napoleon demanded from Prussia a return to the French borders of 1814, with the annexation of Luxembourg, most of Saarland, and the Bavarian Palatinate. Bismarck flatly refused what he disdainfully termed France's politique des pourboires ("tipping policy"). He then communicated Napoleon's written territorial demands to Bavaria and the other southern German states of Württemberg, Baden and Hesse-Darmstadt, which hastened the conclusion of defensive military alliances with these states. France had been strongly opposed to any further alliance of German states, which would have threatened French continental dominance.

The only result of French policy was the consent of Prussia to nominal independence for Saxony, Bavaria, Wurttemberg, Baden, and Hessia-Darmstadt; this was a small victory, and one without appeal to a French public which wanted territory and a French army which wanted revenge. The situation did not suit either France, which unexpectedly found itself next to the militarily powerful Prussian-led North German Confederation, or Prussia, whose foremost objective was to complete the process of uniting the German states under its control. Thus, war between the two powers since 1866 was only a matter of time.
In Prussia, some officials considered a war against France both inevitable and necessary to arouse German nationalism in those states that would allow the unification of a great German empire.

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This aim was epitomized by Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's later statement: "I did not doubt that a Franco-German war must take place before the construction of a United Germany could be realised. Bismarck also knew that France should be the aggressor in the conflict to bring the four southern German states to side with Prussia, hence giving Germans numerical superiority. He was convinced that France would not find any allies in her war against Germany for the simple reason that "France, the victor, would be a danger to everybody—Prussia to nobody," and he added, "That is our strong point." Many Germans also viewed the French as the traditional destabilizer of Europe, and sought to weaken France to prevent further breaches of the peace.

The immediate cause of the war was the candidacy of Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen to the throne of Spain. France feared an encirclement resulting from an alliance between Prussia and Spain. The Hohenzollern prince's candidacy was withdrawn under French diplomatic pressure, but Otto von Bismarck goaded the French into declaring war by releasing an altered summary of the Ems Dispatch, a telegram sent by William I rejecting French demands that Prussia never again support a Hohenzollern candidacy. Bismarck's summary, as mistranslated by the French press Havas, made it sound as if the king had treated the French envoy in a demeaning fashion, which inflamed public opinion in France.

French historians François Roth and Pierre Milza argue that Napoleon III was pressured by a bellicose press and public opinion and thus sought war in response to France's diplomatic failures to obtain any territorial gains following the Austro-Prussian War.[Napoleon III believed he would win a conflict with Prussia.

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The Ems telegram of 13 July 1870 had exactly the effect on French public opinion that Bismarck had intended. "This text produced the effect of a red flag on the Gallic bull", Bismarck later wrote. Gramont, the French foreign minister, declared that he felt "he had just received a slap". The leader of the monarchists in Parliament, Adolphe Thiers, spoke for moderation, arguing that France had won the diplomatic battle and there was no reason for war, but he was drowned out by cries that he was a traitor and a Prussian. Napoleon's new prime minister, Emile Ollivier, declared that France had done all that it could humanly and honorably do to prevent the war, and that he accepted the responsibility "with a light heart". A crowd of 15,000–20,000 people, carrying flags and patriotic banners, marched through the streets of Paris, demanding war. French mobilization was ordered early on 15 July. Upon receiving news of the French mobilization, the North German Confederation mobilized on the night of 15–16 July, while Bavaria and Baden did likewise on 16 July and Württemberg on 17 July. On 19 July 1870, the French sent a declaration of war to the Prussian government. The southern German states immediately sided with Prussia.

Napoleonic France had no documented alliance with other powers and entered the war virtually without allies. The calculation was for a victorious offensive, which, as the French Foreign Minister Gramont stated, was "the only way for France to lure the wary Austrians, Italians and Danes into the French alliance. The involvement of Russia on the side of France was not considered by her at all, since Russia made the lifting of restrictions on its naval construction on the Black Sea imposed on Russia by the Treaty of Paris following the Crimean War a precondition for the union. But Imperial France was not ready to do this. "Bonaparte did not dare to encroach on the Paris Treaty: the worse things turned out in the present, the more precious the heritage of the past became"

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Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1970-053-87
Foto: o.Ang. | 1870

The French Army consisted in peacetime of approximately 426,000 soldiers, some of them regulars, others conscripts who until March 1869 were selected by ballot and served for the comparatively long period of seven years. Some of them were veterans of previous French campaigns in the Crimean War, Algeria, the Franco-Austrian War in Italy, and in the Mexican campaign. However, following the "Seven Weeks War" between Prussia and Austria four years earlier, it had been calculated that, with commitments in Algeria and elsewhere, the French Army could field only 288,000 men to face the Prussian Army, when potentially 1,000,000 would be required.

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Under Marshal Adolphe Niel, urgent reforms were made. Universal conscription and a shorter period of service gave increased numbers of reservists, who would swell the army to a planned strength of 800,000 on mobilisation. Those who for any reason were not conscripted were to be enrolled in the Garde Mobile, a militia with a nominal strength of 400,000. However, the Franco-Prussian War broke out before these reforms could be completely implemented. The mobilisation of reservists was chaotic and resulted in large numbers of stragglers, while the Garde Mobile were generally untrained and often mutinous. French infantry were equipped with the breech-loading Chassepot rifle, one of the most modern mass-produced firearms in the world at the time, with 1,037,555 available in French inventories. With a rubber ring seal and a smaller bullet, the Chassepot had a maximum effective range of some 1,500 metres (4,900 ft) with a short reloading time. French tactics emphasised the defensive use of the Chassepot rifle in trench-warfare style fighting—the so-called feu de bataillon.

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The German army comprised that of the North German Confederation led by the Kingdom of Prussia, and the South German states drawn in under the secret clause of the preliminary peace of Nikolsburg, 26 July 1866, and formalised in the Treaty of Prague, 23 August 1866. Recruitment and organisation of the various armies were almost identical, and based on the concept of conscripting annual classes of men who then served in the regular regiments for a fixed term before being moved to the reserves. This process gave a theoretical peace time strength of 382,000 and a wartime strength of about 1,189,000.

German tactics emphasised encirclement battles like Cannae and using artillery offensively whenever possible. Rather than advancing in a column or line formation, Prussian infantry moved in small groups that were harder to target by artillery or French defensive fire. The sheer number of soldiers available made encirclement en masse and destruction of French formations relatively easy. The army was equipped with the Dreyse needle gun renowned for its use at the Battle of Königgrätz, which was by this time showing the age of its 25-year-old design. The rifle had a range of only 600 m (2,000 ft) and lacked the rubber breech seal that permitted aimed shots. The deficiencies of the needle gun were more than compensated for by the famous Krupp 6-pounder (6 kg despite the gun being called a 6-pounder, the rifling technology enabled guns to fire twice the weight of projectiles in the same calibre) steel breech-loading cannons being issued to Prussian artillery batteries. Firing a contact-detonated shell, the Krupp gun had a longer range and a higher rate of fire than the French bronze muzzle loading cannon, which relied on time fuses. The Prussian army was controlled by the General Staff, under General Helmuth von Moltke. The Prussian army was unique in Europe for having the only such organisation in existence, whose purpose in peacetime was to prepare the overall war strategy, and in wartime to direct operational movement and organise logistics and communications. Moltke embraced new technology, particularly the railroad and telegraph, to coordinate and accelerate mobilisation of large forces.

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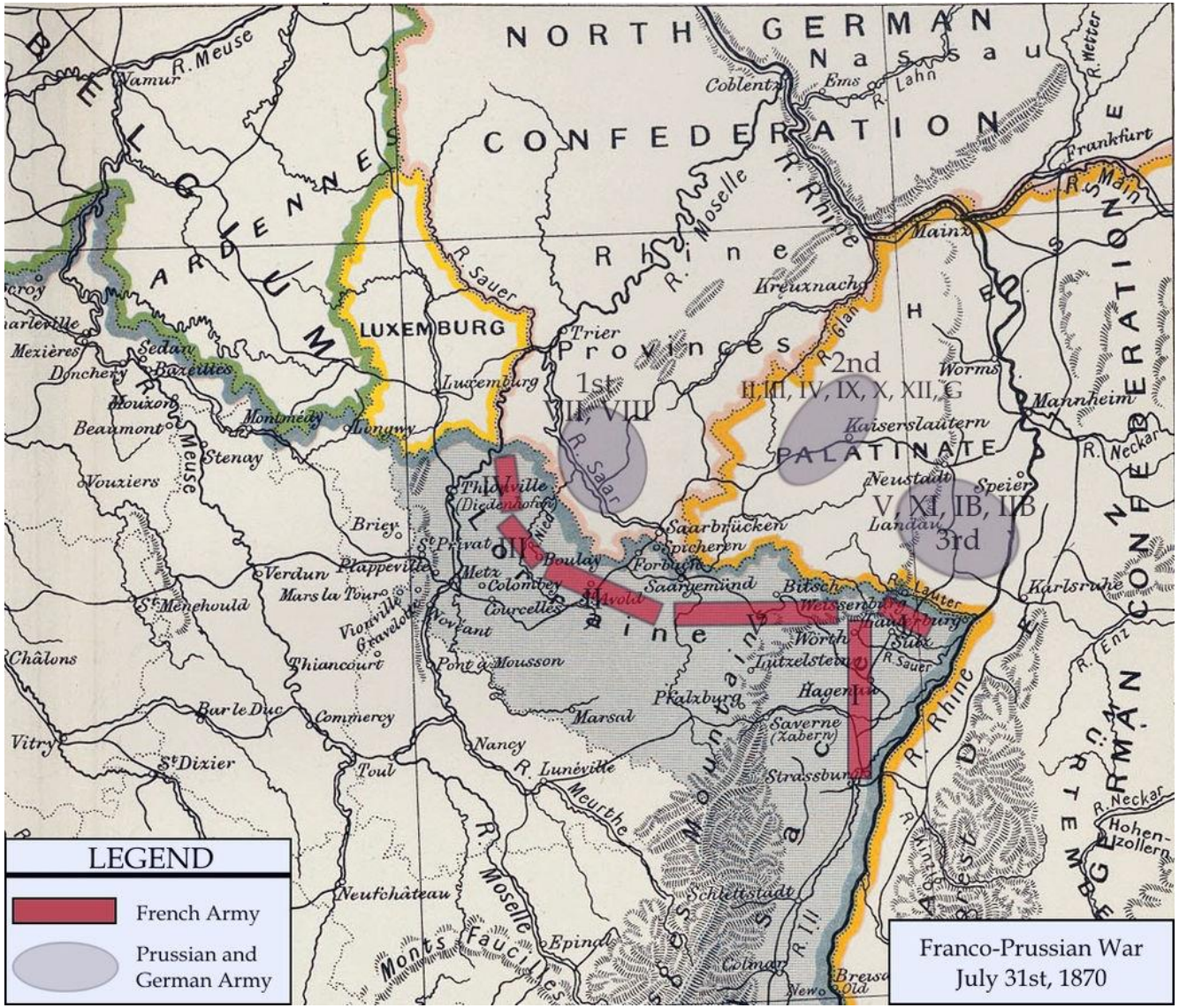

Map of the German and French armies near the common border on 31 July 1870

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On 28 July 1870 Napoleon III left Paris for Metz and assumed command of the newly titled Army of the Rhine, some 202,448 strong and expected to grow as the French mobilization progressed. Marshal MacMahon took command of I Corps (4 infantry divisions) near Wissembourg, Marshal François Canrobert brought VI Corps (4 infantry d.ivisions) to Châlons-sur-Marne in northern France as a reserve and to guard against a Prussian advance through Belgium

A pre-war plan laid down by the late Marshal Niel called for a strong French offensive from Thionville towards Trier and into the Prussian Rhineland. This plan was discarded in favour of a defensive plan by Generals Charles Frossard and Bartélemy Lebrun, which called for the Army of the Rhine to remain in a defensive posture near the German border and repel any Prussian offensive. As Austria, along with Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden were expected to join in a revenge war against Prussia, I Corps would invade the Bavarian Palatinate and proceed to "free" the four South German states in concert with Austro-Hungarian forces. VI Corps would reinforce either army as needed.

Unfortunately for Frossard's plan, the Prussian army mobilised far more rapidly than expected. The Austro-Hungarians, still reeling after their defeat by Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War, were treading carefully before stating that they would only side with France if the south Germans viewed the French positively. This did not materialize as the four South German states had come to Prussia's aid and were mobilizing their armies against France

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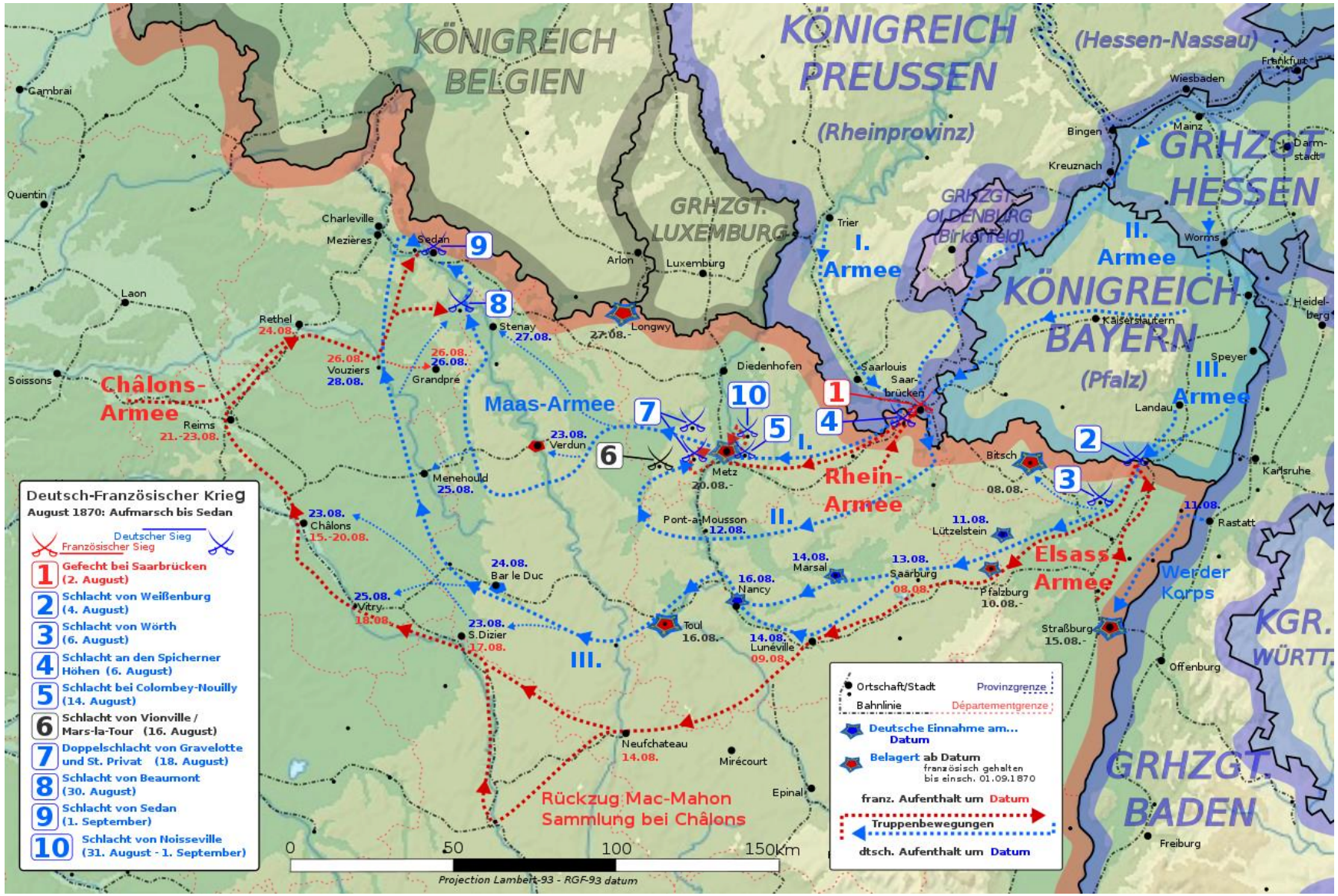

Course of the first phase of the war up to the Battle of Sedan on 1 September 1870

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The "Rifle Battalion 9 from Lauenburg" at Gravelotte

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The Cemetery of St. Privat by Alphonse-Marie-Adolphe de Neuville (1881)

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Surrender of Metz

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The French Army of the East is disarmed at the Swiss border in the monumental 1881 depiction.

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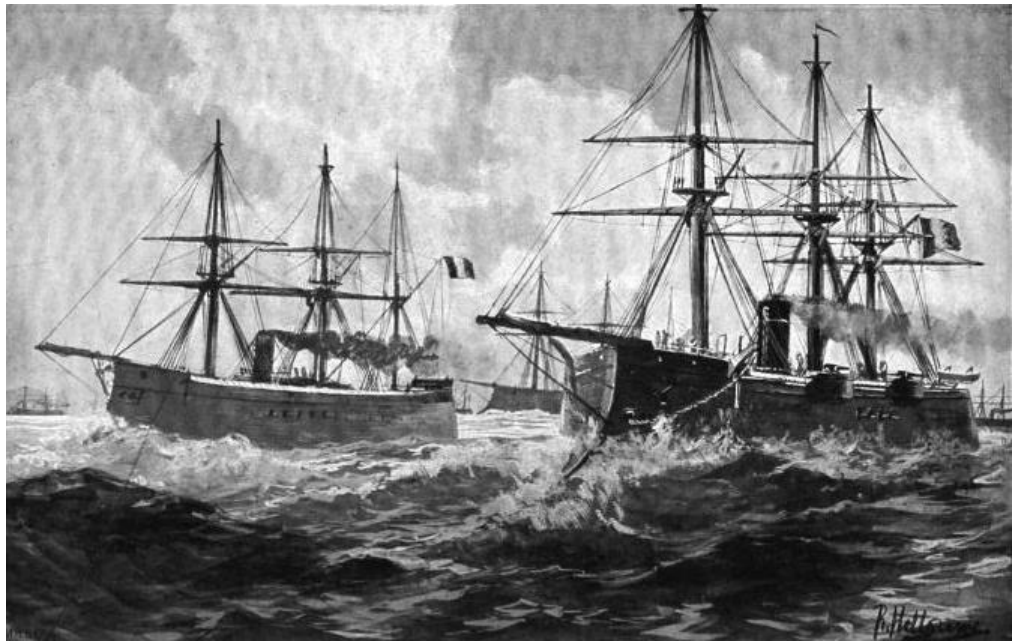

When the war began, the French government ordered a blockade of the North German coasts, which the small North German Federal Navy with only five ironclads and various minor vessels could do little to oppose. For most of the war, the three largest German ironclads were out of service with engine troubles; only the turret ship SMS Arminius was available to conduct operations. By the time engine repairs had been completed, the French fleet had already departed. The blockade proved only partially successful due to crucial oversights by the planners in Paris. Reservists that were supposed to be at the ready in case of war, were working in the Newfoundland fisheries or in Scotland. Only part of the 470-ship French Navy put to sea on 24 July. Before long, the French navy ran short of coal, needing 200 short tons (180 t) per day and having a bunker capacity in the fleet of only 250 short tons (230 t).

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The quick German victory over the French stunned neutral observers, many of whom had expected a French victory and most of whom had expected a long war. The strategic advantages which the Germans had were not appreciated outside Germany until after hostilities had ceased. Other countries quickly discerned the advantages given to the Germans by their military system, and adopted many of their innovations, particularly the general staff, universal conscription, and highly detailed mobilization system

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Europe after the Franco-Prussian War and the unification of Germany

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Proclamation of the German Empire, painted by Anton von Werner

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The defeat in the Franco-Prussian War led to the birth of Revanchism (literally, "revenge-ism") in France, characterised by a deep sense of bitterness, hatred and demand for revenge against Germany. This was particularly manifested in loose talk of another war with Germany in order to reclaim Alsace and Lorraine. It also led to the development of nationalist ideologies emphasising "the ideal of the guarded, self-referential nation schooled in the imperative of war", an ideology epitomised by figures such as General Georges Ernest Boulanger in the 1880s. Paintings that emphasized the humiliation of the defeat became in high demand, such as those by Alphonse de Neuville. Revanchism was not a major cause of war in 1914 because it faded after 1880. J.F.V. Keiger says, "By the 1880s Franco-German relations were relatively good. The French public had very little interest in foreign affairs and elite French opinion was strongly opposed to war with its more powerful neighbor. The elites were now calm and considered it a minor issue. The Alsace-Lorraine issue remained a minor theme after 1880, and Republicans and Socialists systematically downplayed the issue. Return did not become a French war aim until after World War I began.